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SUBJECT: MAKING BREAD, NOT WAR, IN JAFFA: AN ISRAELI ARAB GROWS HIS BUSINESS THROUGH PEACE ACTIVISM AND OUTREACH.

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11. (SBU) Summary: In the mixed city of Jaffa, where Jews and Arabs buy and sell side-by-side in one of the busiest marketplace environments in Israel, prominent bakery owner Hamis Abouelafia made news this week by presenting a ceremonial loaf of leavened bread to Jews at an end-of-Passover celebration. This event was the most recent example of the work Abouelafia has been doing for years, which aims to foster a better business environment for Israeli Arabs as well as encourage peaceful coexistence in the broader arena. Economic officer spoke with him about subjects ranging from his multi-ethnic charity organization to the annual Arab Land Day events, and discovered that his unusual perspective may offer some surprising solutions to the issues Israeli-Arab businesses face in the current environment. End summary.

Bread and Circus: In a Mixed Marketplace, Symbolic Gestures Pay Dividends

12. (SBU) Hamis Abouelafia, a familiar Jaffa personality whose family has worked on the same spot in the town's center since 1879, became news this week when Israel's channel 2 aired a spot featuring his participation in the historic revival of a Moroccan Jewish Passover tradition. Invited by the Savir family of Tel Aviv as the guest of honor at the Mimuna celebration, Abouelafia presented over 300 revelers with the first plate of hametz, or leavened bread, at sunset to mark the end of the holiday. Quoting the late Zionist poet Natan Alterman's statement that "peace will be made in the marketplace before it is made in the government," he encouraged others to follow suit in coming years. Host Ami Savir explained that this gesture of mutual respect was once a cornerstone of the Passover celebration and a way of affirming the good relations between Jews and Muslims in the mixed areas of Morocco. He said the symbol was particularly apt for modern Israel, where the circumstances are dire and the need for coexistence urgent.

13. (SBU) At a meeting with Abouelafia at his street side bakery, he restated that he believes peace will be made primarily through the activities of everyday people, in the streets and markets of the "schonot", or close-knit neighborhoods. He should know, he says: his family has seen six generations of booming business in Jaffa, through five wars and two Intifadas. Today Abouelafia and Brothers employs over 200 workers in restaurants, bakeries, and a real estate office. He says the key to his success should surprise no one: take care of your employees and invest resources in your customer base. He believes that in this environment, 'resources' means intangible, not-for-sale items such as respect, understanding, and a careful tread around sensitive political issues.

14. (SBU) In the workplace, Abouelafia said he endeavors to foster harmony by requesting that his employees turn off the television during potentially incendiary events, and by discouraging political discussions on the job. He said he makes a point to hire Jews, Muslims, and Christians in equal measure, working closely himself with the Jewish woman he employs as his assistant. His customer base is mixed as well, and on any given day a passerby can spot black-hatted Haredim haggling next to bearded sheikhs for the softest laffa and freshest baklava. He takes pains to keep such Jewish customers coming back by doing them an unusual favor: he closes up shop over the Passover holiday out of respect for the dietary restrictions of the observant. He notes that the gratitude the gesture gains him is more valuable than the money he does not make during the holiday week. Efforts like these may help keep his business on solid ground even amidst conflict, because, as he says, "Abouelafia is a household name on both sides."

Facing the Reality of the Intifada

15. (SBU) Despite such gestures of outreach and goodwill, Abouelafia speaks freely about the difficulties he and other Arab businessmen face in the mixed cities. He says that the second Intifada has harmed Israeli-Arab business more than any previous conflict - and he is unsure whether it is fear or a vague concept of punishment that has caused a drop in the number of Jewish customers. Economic officer held an informal conversation with a group of young Tel Aviv Jews who emphasized the punitive element. They noted that when it came to light that some Israeli Arabs had supported several of the suicide bombings in Tel Aviv, Abouelaffia was hit especially hard because of his visibility. Despite the fact that Abouelafia's bakeries and restaurants employ and serve Jews as well as Israeli Arabs, rumors began circulating that his employees spit on or even poisoned the food.

16. (SBU) Abouelafia believes that his response to such negative sentiment is unique in that it reaches beyond his own economic self-interest. During last year's intense period of almost-daily suicide bombings and heightened tensions, many of his friends who owned small to medium-sized businesses such as humus stands, gift shops, and garages, simply closed up shop and left for Canada or the United States. Abouelafia took a different tack, printing up plastic bags for customers on which were written, in Hebrew and Arabic, "Abouelafia calls both sides to be patient and to refrain from violence." Similarly, Abouelafia saw this year's Arab Land Day as an opportunity to discourage his neighbors from activities that could be seen as incendiary and lead to situations of real danger. He says he called all of the Arab leaders of Jaffa together) businessmen and sheikhs, Christians and Muslims alike - and advised them to keep a tight hold on their neighborhoods. "You can know how a protest starts", he told them, "but not how it might end. Stay inside this year." Whether through his influence or due to other factors, there were no demonstrations) and hence no clashes with Israeli authorities) in Jaffa on Land Day.

Sponsoring Peace: Abouelafia's Coexistence Association

17. (SBU) Abouelafia explains that when he realized the second Intifada would not end quickly, he wanted something in place that would counteract its devastating effects on his business and his community. Last year he founded Abouelafia's Coexistence Association, a charity run by a board of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim residents of Jaffa. The Coexistence Association gives financial assistance to needy families from the three religious groups, for anything from a Passover Seder to children's clothing. The only catch, he says, is that beneficiaries are made aware the money comes from an organization founded by Arabs. When he donated money to a soccer team that included Jewish and Arab children, for example, their jerseys bore his name. When the Association paid for supplies and tee shirts for a school tour group traveling the country, Abouelafia was especially glad to see his logo in a short spot on the Hebrew news.

18. (SBU) Comment: Abouelafia acknowledges that his Association does as much to counteract the unpopularity of Israeli-Arab business in times of conflict as it does to foster peaceful coexistence in the broader arena) and he makes no apologies for promoting peace because of its economic benefits. Abouelafia is unusual in his local fame and his inherited wealth, and it would be difficult for less established Arab businessmen to imitate the outreach tactics he employs, such as quoting Zionist poets and making conciliatory public statements at a Passover Seder, without alienating some community members. But the fact that his daily turnover has increased since the founding of the Coexistence Association may encourage other Israeli-Arab businessmen to find their own programs of outreach to Jewish customers. End comment.

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